

Mrs. Woolcott

*With the kind regards of the
author*

THE LIFE AND THE DEATH OF THE BELIEVER;

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A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED TO THE

Second Congregational Society in Norwich,

October 13, 1844,

THE SABBATH SUBSEQUENT TO THE INTERMENT OF

MRS. MEHETABLE A. BOND.

BY ALVAN BOND.

Published by Request.

NORWICH:

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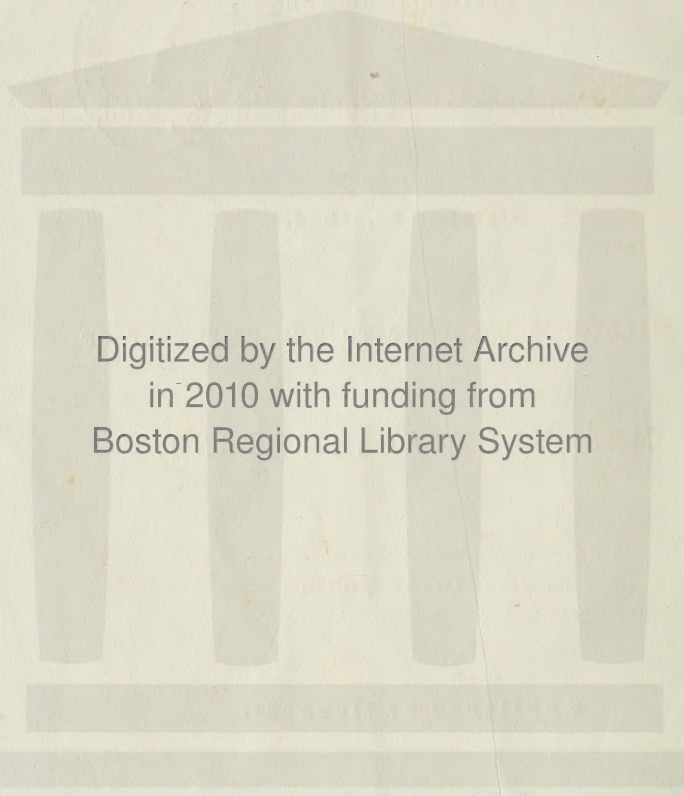
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SERMON.

Philip. I. 21.

"FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST, AND TO DIE IS GAIN."

THE apostle, whose words I have read, manifests a calm and happy state of mind in his perilous situation. He was at this time wearing a prisoner's chains in Rome, and waiting the issue of a persecuting tyrant's decision. From the language he uses, it is evident, that his spirit was unruffled even in prospect of sufferings, and of death. Indeed he can with difficulty decide, which to choose, life or death, in case the option were submitted to him. Life, as devoted to Christ, had its important uses, and death, as releasing him from the sins and sorrows of the world, had its peculiar benefits. Such was his piety, that life, so long as spared, would be devoted to Christ,—and death, whenever experienced, would be gain.

There are some subjects, which are very differently estimated, according as they are contemplated in the light of *reason*, or of *christianity*. Thus in the light of the *former* human life is prized as the supreme good, being contemplated in connexion with the enjoyment of the riches, the honors, the friendships, and the pleasures of the world.—But death is deprecated as the supreme evil, being contemplated in connexion with its appalling terrors, and the end of all earthly sources of enjoyment.

In the light of the *latter*, life is valued highly, but valued as a season of probation, and of services done for God. It is the precious seed-time for immortality. Death is indeed regarded as a most solemn and momentous change, but as it respects the believer, it is considered as unspeakable gain. It is therefore the sentiment of religion,—“I would not live away!”—With these views the apostle utters the emphatic language of a strong and animated faith—“For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

The subject which the text introduces as the theme of present contemplation, is *the estimate in which christianity holds the life and the death of the believer in Jesus.*

I. *My first topic is the estimate, in which christianity holds the life of the christian.*

“For me to live is Christ.”—The apostle is in doubt, whether he was destined soon to suffer martyrdom, or be released to continue his labors in the kingdom of Christ.—What he designed to express as the sentiment of his heart, is this,—“for my life, if I am permitted to live, will be devoted to the service of Christ.”—My life is Christ.—He had no other business, or interest, or honor, or pleasure, for which to live, but Christ and his glory, his service, his favor. To illustrate the emphatic idea conveyed by the apostle’s language, let us attend to the question, *what is the light, in which christianity regards the life of the believer?*

In determining this question we shall be aided by noting in the *first* place some of the *erronious views*, entertained of christian life.

With some, a christian life is principally a matter of *form*. The radical pharisaic error of formalism was one of the earliest evils, that worked its way into the christian

church, and produced a sad decline of spiritual religion.—

The same leaven has in a greater or less degree prevailed in all times, and among all churches. There are the forms of *external ceremony*, that have often been elevated to a point of importance which the gospel has not assigned to them. Compared with the inward spirit, the living and life giving elements of christianity, they are but “beggarly elements,” and the devotion paid to them is a bondage.

When religion is dressed up in the imposing drapery of sacred ceremonies, it makes an appeal to the senses; and though there may be awakened feelings of veneration, still it is but the homage of superstition, with which man’s spitual nature cannot sympathise. The obvious tenor of christianity is inconsistent with, and opposed to the parade and ceremony of formalism. Paul in spirit and practice towered far above the earthly platform, on which formality pays its heartless homage. The apostles, and the first christians were too thoroughly baptized with the spirit of a spiritual religion, to be concerned with those ceremonial forms and modes which have been ever attractive to those, who were strangers to the power of godliness.

“Decently and in order” was the rule inculcated by apostolic authority in the observance of religious worship.—The early christians were no friends of confusion, eccentricity, or novelty. They were taught to contemplate God as a spirit, and to “worship him in spirit and in truth.”—This elementary truth naturally tended to lower in their estimation the importance of any such imposing forms, as appeal in their effect merely to the senses. But when christianity began to be corrupted, the spirituality of religious worship gave place to a lifeless formality. And it is the case now, that the religion of some, perhaps many, con-

sists more in the outward observances of religious worship, than in such services as call into exercise the affections of the soul. How many, who with visible solemnity enter the sanctuary of God, and come before him as his people come, never enter the inner sanctuary of that spiritual worship, which brings the soul into sweet and intimate communion with Heaven.

There is the formalism of doctrinal *symbols*. Such symbols are intended as an epitomised statement or exhibition of the doctrines of christianity. They have been in some instances prepared with great discrimination and judgment, and rendered highly valuable as brief and comprehensive memorials of christian doctrine. Such is the memorable confession of faith, prepared by the illustrious Westminster Assembly about two hundred years ago.—Other formularies of christian doctrine have their merits.

But if piety is made to consist in the public profession of belief in these symbols,—in other words,—if it is the confession of the lips, expressive of the mere convictions of the understanding, while the heart believeth not unto righteousness, it will prove to be but a formal religion. They may honestly assent to the symbols of a sacred faith, and earnestly contend for them, while the heart refuses to beat in unison with the holy doctrines, which are thus received.

Thus formalism, as you may see, assumes several different aspects. And though some of these aspects may be less objectionable than others, none of them will be recognized as meeting the requisitions of such a life, as Paul refers to in the text—it is not living to Christ.

With some a christian life consists essentially in pleasurable *emotions*, and peculiar *frames* of mind.—There are in religion many things, which so appeal to the mind, as to

awaken certain sentiments and emotions, that resemble the exercises of the renovated soul. There are views of God, of providence, and of human duty, which often awaken in the unbeliever sentiments of admiration. Christianity in many instances has extorted from those, who reject her divine claims, the tribute of a sentimental homage. There may be much of such emotion, where there is destitution of true faith and love.

Again, it is a mistaken notion, that certain peculiar *frames* of mind constitute the essential thing in the life of the christian. Religion does indeed bring the affections into vigorous exercise, and requires its friends to be "fervent in spirit." It condemns that chilling apathy, which so often palsies the sensibilities of the heart—that apathy which has no tears to shed over human woe—which never sighs or cries in view of Zion's desolation. Christianity has a heart to feel.

The feeling, however, that is awakened in the soul by the influence of religion, is *constant*. I do not say, that it stands always at the same point of fervor. But it is constant,—glowing with a warmth that readily kindles, when the appropriate objects are brought to view.

Those peculiar frames, which in the view of some, are all-important, are generally dependent on the existing nature of peculiar circumstances, and consequently are transient. By certain kinds of influences, such as work by a sort of forced process, the dead spirit may be galvanized into an excited state, and for a season there may be experienced the fervors of an uncommon zeal, and the luxury of pleasurable emotion. But all such godliness is generally "like the morning cloud and the early dew." Its charac-

teristics are instability, eccentricity, and animal sympathy. To depend on it is to rest in delusion.

Very different from the foregoing views, is the estimate in which christianity holds the life of the believer. By the language, "for me to live is Christ,"—Paul meant nothing less than a cheerful, unreserved, and entire consecration of the heart, life, and substance to the service and glory of Christ.—Nothing is kept back by the true believer, when he gives himself up to the Savior as a disciple. There is something peculiarly solemn in the public consecration of himself, which the professor makes, when he becomes united to Christ's visible kingdom. Then we present ourselves a "living sacrifice unto God." We virtually, and if sincere, do actually resign all to the hands of God—our talents, our influence, our time, our affections, and our earthly recourses. We keep back nothing. Such is the dedication, which christianity requires, and nothing less will God accept.

But it is not enough to do this when we publicly avouch the Lord, Jehovah to be our God and chosen portion forever. This solemn act of self-consecration should be renewed daily, so long as we are continued in the service of Christ on the earth. Every returning day is a renewal of our life, as preserved by our Father's care, and it demands of us a renewed dedication of ourselves to his service.—That day is lost to the soul which does not begin with God—with devout aspirations of heart to him, and actual communion with him as the Father of our spirits.

The life of faith is nothing less than a steadfast, persevering, consistent adherence to the duties of religion.—There are certain duties, the performance of which is indispensable to christian life. Such is the duty of search-

ing the scriptures,—the duty of watchfulness and prayer,—the duty of self-denial, of active benevolence, and the worship of God by the observance of the Sabbath, of christian ordinances, and stated seasons of social and private worship. The connection between the stated, serious, faithful performance of these duties, and progress in piety, is as absolute and necessary, as is the connection between the habitual use of food, and the health of the body,

One cause, probably the principal cause of weakness of faith, of a sickly piety, delusion and backsliding, is the lack of order, punctuality, and conscientiousness in the performance of religious duties. The religion of some is all crowded into the ordinary services of the Sabbath. The world is allowed to have the exclusive occupancy of the heart, the time, and the services during all the days of the week, except the Sabbath. And when this is the case, such will be the chilling influence on the soul, that the sacred services of the Sabbath itself will receive but a heartless and unprofitable attention. Unless religion holds the *first* place in the heart, it has no place there;—and unless it receives from its professed friends *daily* attention, it receives no such attention, as meets its holy demands.

Christianity views the life of the believer as *progressive* to the end. There is continual progress in sacred knowledge, in the power of faith, in the fervor of prayer, in christian love, and in the firmness of hope. “The path of the just is as the shining light, shining more and more unto the perfect day.” Religion with the first christians was a daily and diligent business. It stood above every thing else. An apostle but echoes the sentiments of his christian brethren, when he said,—“I press toward the mark.” True religion, when its dawn first rises in the soul, is often dim and

shadowy. But like the orb of day, when its golden beams redden in the east, it becomes fairer and brighter in its progress, till it reaches its perfect zenith in heaven.

Such are the views which christianity entertains and inculcates in respect to the life of the believer. "For me to live is Christ."—Life, so long as spared to me, is to be supremely and cheerfully devoted to the cause and honor of Christ. Such was Paul's decision, and such his views of what christianity demanded of its friends. Such a life is a life of holiness, a life of usefulness, a life of activity in doing good, a life of faith, a life of fervent, effectual prayer, a life of uniform consistency, and a life of spiritual enjoyment.

II. *My second topic is the view, which christianity takes of the death of the believer.*

"To die is gain."—What a sentiment is here expressed.—How unlike the universal sentiments of human wisdom. Where is the philosopher, who has ever reasoned about the *gains* of death? Paul is calm and deliberate, when he utters the singular idea, "for me to die is gain."—He only utters a sentiment which every true christian may adopt as his own. *What is gained?* Several things readily suggest themselves, as constituting the gain, which the christian finds in the event of death.

There is a *release from the sins and sorrows* of this present evil world. The christian, so long as he continues in the flesh, is annoyed, grieved, tormented with sin. He finds that when he would do good, evil is present with him. He abhors sin, and sighs for deliverance from its power. He feels that there can be no such thing as heaven for him, till he is entirely delivered from the power of sin. And were he to experience this deliverance here, he would

find a heaven on earth. Perfect freedom from this vexing evil is one thing gained by the believer in death.

This world is a wilderness, in which the pilgrim finds, that trials and afflictions await him. Often is the bitter cup put into his hand, and he must drink its contents. It is the announcement of revelation—"many are the afflictions of the righteous." The highest degree of piety attainable on earth, does not exempt the believer from trials. "Our journey is a thorny maze," and Christ has assured us, that the way to heaven lies through a land of tribulation. "We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened." At death the christian is delivered from all his sorrows.

There is also gained complete *exemption* from the assaults and conflicts of temptation.—The tempter lies in ambush in the christian's path, and his assaults are frequent, are renewed however often repelled, and by them the christian is harrassed all along his journey to heaven. But these conflicts never shall meet the child of God, after he has reached the heavenly fields, or when he shall walk the golden streets of Jerusalem, his happy home. The "divers temptations," encountered on probationary ground, have their important uses; and every fresh encounter, in which the soul is triumphant, augments the power of religious principle, and brightens the prospect of complete victory in the end. It will indeed be precious gain to be forever removed beyond the reach of the Tempter's ensnaring influence, and malicious, perilous assaults.

In this world *flesh* and *sense* oppose many obstacles in the way of the believer's progress. They fetter the spirit, and embarrass its movements, when it attempts to rise.—How often is it the case, that the spirit of the believer, when it attempts to soar upward on the wing of faith, en-

counters, as it rises, the opposing influences of the flesh, so that it becomes weary in its flight, and is driven back faint and languid to an earthly level. So the lark, (to borrow an idea from J. Taylor,) in her morning flight to greet the rising sun, sings as she ascends, till she meets hostile breezes in the skies, against which she beats and flutters, till her strength begins to fail, when she descends and sits panting in her lowly bed of grass, till her vigor is restored. Still the believer takes fresh courage from some sweet promise, and waiting on the Lord, renews his strength, and "mounts upward with wings as the eagle," and triumphs over the downward tendencies of flesh and sense, from the wearying clogs of which he is forever freed at death.

The freedom from these things implies a condition of complete and *confirmed holiness* in heaven. How precious such a gain! There is indeed a separation from much that is pleasing,—much that is endearing.—But there is a gain of that which is far more pleasing,—and far more enduring. Is the christian charmed, as he looks forth upon the loveliness of nature's landscape, where he recognizes the skill and power of his Father's hand, and the goodness of his Father's heart? He is delighted far more with the scenery of that brighter world, where bloom the trees of life with fadeless verdure, where flow the fountains of living water, where "the lamb is the light thereof."

Is the christian deeply interested in the dear friends, whose society and love have cheered the days of his pilgrimage. He finds on his arrival at his Father's house, dearer friends,—the choice spirits of every age and nation. In that world what blessed recognitions may be confidently anticipated. The pious parent perhaps is there to greet

the son or daughter on their arrival. There is the pious brother, the sainted sister, the much loved companion, the esteemed friend. There the mother may meet the lovely babes, that Jesus called early to his arms. O how will she rejoice to recognize those unquenched sparks of intelligence, shining as little brilliants in the Savior's crown!

But more than all, the departed christian sees, and rejoices in that Redeemer, who was so precious to his soul, and in whom he could "rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory," while unseen.—With what rapture will his soul be transported, when he comes to see him as he is in his glory. How precious the believer's gain in death. A world is his whose beauties infinitely outshine the loveliest scenery of earth,—and society endeared not merely by the relationships of time, but by the cemented ties of a divine and endless fellowship,—

"Where perfect love and friendship reign
Through all eternity."——

The christian is at death removed, not as is commonly remarked, from the land of the *living* to the land of the *dead*; but from the land of the *dead* to the land of the *living*. There is no death in heaven. No cemeteries, or sepulchres, or monumental pillars occupy the sweet fields of the heavenly Canaan. There life reigns—life eternal. O what mind can comprehend the import of eternal life, on which the christian enters, as he dies!

Such is a brief view of the estimate, in which christianity holds the *death* of the believer. I have not time to enlarge on the topic; but enough has been said to show, that it was not without substantial reason, that Paul asserted, "for me to die is gain."—Gain it is to every true christian,—precious, infinite, everlasting gain.

In conclusion I remark in the *first* place, that *there is an intimate connexion between a godly life and such a precious death.*——The religious appearances in the chamber of sickness are not always a satisfactory index of the character of the dying, or of their future prospects.—In some cases, where but little if any attention has been devoted to the service of Christ during life;—yes, even where the soul has rested in error and delusion, there may be at death indications of confidence, and professions of peace. Little or no reliance can be placed on the genuineness of such confidence or peace, unless the life has been a life of faith, prayer, and piety.

On the other hand the christian, who for many years has walked with God, may at death find his horizon overcast with gloom and darkness. The cloud may come between his soul and the sun of righteousness.—But this need not weaken the hope we have, that he will find death unspeakable gain. His passage over Jordan may be dark and stormy, but his eye will open on a cloudless day, as he reaches the peaceful shore beyond.

Still as a general thing it holds true, that there will be a marked and visible connection between living well, and dying well. A life of faith and holiness will with few exceptions, where the powers of reason are preserved, be followed with peace, and hope, and triumph in death.

In the *second* place I remark, that *the power of a christian life is signal and triumphant.* The Bible furnishes numerous illustrations of this sentiment. Take the case of Enoch and Noah, of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, of Moses and Joshua, of the pious kings—the pious prophets—the evangelists and apostles, Paul, John, the martyrs, the reformers, and the Puritan fathers—of Swartz, Brainard,

Martyn and Payson,—the dairyman's daughter, Harriet Newell, Sarah L. Smith, and a cloud of witnesses, whose names might be mentioned. O what power was there in the lives of these departed saints! What power in doing good while on earth,—what power to achieve a signal victory over death,—and what power in their ever-living example.

I trust it will not be deemed out of place for me to allude in this connexion to that beloved woman, whom many of us during the past week followed to her resting place with the dead.* The tender relation she sustained to the Speaker, forbids any protracted eulogy on her life and character. Nor will this be necessary, where she was intimately known, in the walks of christian life. Her record is in the memory of many, who knew and loved her in the various relations of life ;—and there it will be cherished as sweet and precious.

In early youth she consecrated herself to Christ, in a public profession of religion, and such was the sincerity of this consecration, as evinced by her manner of life, and such her steadfastness, dilligence, and devotion, that her piety was rapidly matured, and efficiently developed.† Naturally diffident and self-distrustful, the tenor of her way was noiseless, and it was always with a trembling step that she engaged in those services, which brought her under the eye and observation of others. As the rays of the sun fall silently on the field, which it warms and enlivens, so her piety in its influence was gentle, and quiet, but efficient and uniform.

* Mrs. M. A. Bond, wife of the writer, who died on the 4th of October.

† She united with the second church in Milford, her native place, at the age of thirteen.

When she came among you, it was with a strong and deep sense of the heavy responsibilities she assumed in her new relation.—She remarked but a short time since, that when she assumed these responsibilities, she placed one foot upon the promise,—“my grace is sufficient for thee”—and the other foot on the promise,—“as thy days so shall thy strength be”—and resting on these precious promises, she had ever found herself sustained in all her cares, trials and duties. It becomes not me to speak of the manner, in which she has sustained the domestic relations, in which strong affection was the ruling element; nor of the manner, in which she has fulfilled the duties, involved in the position she occupied in relation to you.—On this point her acquaintance have doubtless formed their judgment. It is enough for me to say, that she has been most deeply interested in the welfare of this church,—that she has been constant and earnest in prayer for its peace and prosperity, and conscientious in whatever she has attempted to promote its interests.

One subject of deep concern with her, to which I will just allude, was the *formation of religious habits*. This she regarded as vital in its bearing on christian character and usefulness. There are several things, which in her judgment, were *fundamental*. One was a *daily* consecration to her God.—Morning devotion was regarded by her as most happy in its bearing on the life of piety. Daily communion with God in secret was what she never omitted. Another habit, on which she insisted as of vital importance, was the *daily study* of a portion of the word of God. With her the Bible was *the* book. She called it the living fountain, whose streams she ever loved.—She attached equal importance to a *strictly religious observance*

of the Sabbath.—All its hours in her judgment were sacred,—and to be improved in the service of God either in private or public duties. The *habit of benevolence* was in her view essential to christian character. Religion, she used to say, not only *opened* the heart, but kept it open to the calls of human suffering. Again, *uniformity* in religious duty was regarded by her as indispensable to the consistency and strength of religious character. She was not satisfied with occasional excitement of the religious affections,—with periodic flights of devotion and ecstacy ;—but pursued such a fixed, stedfast, uniform manner of holy living, as resulted in a continual increase of faith, hope, and the pleasures of godliness.

During six months she, with unexhausted patience and cheerful resignation, endured the sufferings and languor of disease. From the commencement of her illness she had a presentiment of its result ; though her feelings for a long time were alternating between hope and fear,—the latter gradually increasing, till she yielded to the certainty, that her end was near. As the crisis of dissolution approached, she was calm and cheerful. The last few days of her life were days of heavenly peace.—Faith became stronger, and hope firmer, as she approached the time of her departure.

The time of her release, when it came, found her ready to meet the summons. She knew that the hour had come. And after calling to her bedside each of the family and friends, who were watching the impressive scene, she addressed to them her last words,—commended her departing spirit to her precious Savior,—and then uttered the triumphant language,—“ O death, where is thy sting ! O grave, where is thy victory ! Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”—

On being reminded, that she was buffeting the billows of Jordan, she replied, with a smile beaming with an unearthly expression of rapturous confidence,—“NOT DISMAYED.”—When her voice was lost in the weakness of death’s last struggle, she raised her hands and eyes to heaven, as if the sweet glories of that world were rushing on her view, till nature’s last energies being exhausted, she closed her own eye-lids, and without a struggle fell asleep, to awake in the spirit’s world.

Such scenes illustrate the power of christian faith, and the value of a pious life. O how sweet the scene when christians die!—How glorious the gain they acquire in exchanging earth for heaven.—While such examples demonstrate the triumphant power of faith, when it comes to the stern conflict with death,—they should inspire us with the serious and decided purpose so to consecrate ourselves to the service of God, that we can say in the sincerity of the heart,—“for me to live is Christ.”—And then, come the crisis when it may, we shall experience as a glorious reality the triumphant announcement of the apostle—“TO DIE IS GAIN.”

Sweet is the scene when christians die,
When holy souls retire to rest;
How mildly beams the closing eye!
How gently heaves th’ expiring breast!

So fades a summer cloud away!
So sinks the gale when storms are o’er;
So gently shuts the eye of day;
So dies a wave along the shore.

Triumphant smiles the victor’s brow,
Fanned by some guardian angel’s wing;
O grave! where is thy victory now,
And where, O death, where is thy sting!

